INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Dear Peter:

First thoughts -- Herodotus

I returned from visiting my sister in Canton, packed up my long life in Prague in three whirlwind, jet-lagged days, and flew to Istanbul. I hope I may be forgiven the wave of culture shock which hit me when gothic spires resolved themselves into minarets, Dragon Boats on the Pearl River into oil tankers on the Bosphorus, and I first heard the muezzins.

That wave has now started to subside. This "Newsletter" is my first account of what I have begun to see. I confess at once to a healthy diffidence that I see very well yet. Medieval scholars commonly began any work with an apology for being unequal to the task at hand, and I am happy to follow in that tradition. I have only actively explored Istanbul through the end of summer: the short space, in fact, from the ripening of wild blackberry along the Bosphorus to the first appearance this week of portable charcoal stoves for roasting chestnuts in front of the Blue Mosque. So I am very wary of capsule judgments in such a complicated place, or claiming authority prematurely for what I observe.

But what sort of authority? What sort of observations? Embarking on a fellowship as gorgeous as this, offering (practically demanding) release from the cathedocracy, the tyranny of degrees and academic trade-unionism, or the conventional wisdom of the policy-planners -- all the worlds I've known, in short -- I would be sorry to find I had confined my "Newsletters" to news, or foreign policy commentary, or "current events" at all. I was doing that anyway as a scribe in the sunless rooms (literal and metaphorical) from which the fellowship plucked me. In that world, "analytical objectivity" was used far too often as an excuse for taking the limited view or, worse, to cloak ignorance. As a rule one wrote compactly for fear of being expansive, and timidly on the pretext of being prudent... So what is my conception of a Newsletter? I suspect it will be difficult, even undesirable, to hold myself at arm's length from what I describe. I don't know if this disavowal unwittingly opens the door to a form of Anti-Memoires...

Perhaps, for the moment, I would do best by invoking Herodotus, who appropriately knew this part of the world well. Until I am more grounded and certain of myself here, I can only commend avoided a picturesque moment or a good anecdote; and pioneered the lost art (crushed by one of this century's evil -isms, academic credentialism) of being informative, and imaginative, at the same time. [Turkish, incidentally, supports this practice; it must be unique among languages in having a separate set of tenses [-*mis*] which imply inferential knowledge, reported information which the speaker is not fully able or willing to vouch is accurate. If I were writing Turkish, *-mis* would be a feature of the lines below.]

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Bogaziçi University -- Languages -- The scientology of language learning

I polished my Turkish on a language course at Bogaziçi (Bosphorus) University, the famous Robert College until its name was changed in 1971. It has been a stopping-off spot for so many famous orientalists that it was fun just to think I was there walking the campus, which reminded me of Princeton with its stone buildings and shady alleys. I kept my nose to the grindstone and socialized as little as possible. The great majority of my fellow students were academics, or training for the profession. All but a smattering were Americans. The roster of their universities was impressive, as was their polylinguality. But I noted with regret the strong concentration among their numbers of Ottoman historians. Among the group we had an Islamic art historian, an anthropologist, a professor of political science, it is true; nevertheless, I was party to more than my share of historians' shop-talk about manuscripts, libraries, borrowing regimes, cataloguing systems and CD-ROM -- as well as a couple genuinely exciting "hunt for the scroll"-type stories, possibly apocryphal, which would have looked well in The Name of the Rose... The second and third languages were mostly Middle Eastern. For myself, after five years' immersion in the Slavic languages of Eastern Europe, it was an exotic treat to hear some Arabic or Hebrew over lunch, or a snatch of classical Persian poetry quoted for my benefit and which indeed sounded, as often described, like sugar melting on the tongue. As I say, though, I regretted this academic preponderance, this eastern orientation, even while I enjoyed it. I found myself hoping that this group wasn't a representative cross-section of Westerners serious about Turkey. Without meaning disrespect for the Ottoman past, or indeed for its historians for whom mastering Arabic and Persian makes sense, I began to wish more people had enrolled at Bogaziçi animated by a vigorous interest in Turkey's present.

After all, since Ottoman days Turkey's contacts with Arab countries have been distant, often frigid. It remains to be seen what sort of a future is presaged by Yassar Arafat's reception this month by Prime Minister Çiller. Relations with Iran are on the rise (an Iranian-Turkish pipeline to carry gas from Turkmenistan was announced recently), but it's early days. Meanwhile, one must have sharp eyes to find students combining Turkish with Russian -- despite a list of economic interpenetrations and shared or competing geographical interests as long as your arm; or with Ukrainian -- despite Crimea remaining a geopolitical focal point; or with the obscurer languages of the Balkans for anyone (Ottomanists included) concerned with the post-war reconstruction of that sorry peninsula. (In the short time I've been in Turkey the Presidents of both Bulgaria and Romania have made state visits.) The make-up of the group seemed not to reflect this multi-dimensionality at all... Surely those learning German for the summer in Heidelberg or Tübingen are not predominantly students of Frederick II and Martin Luther?

To be fair, an alternative possibility is that English speakers with a difficult language like Arabic under their belt are more confident in their skills as linguists and so less intimidated by Turkish. I trust that some people reading this will nod in silent confirmation that Turkish is notoriously hard. I have every sympathy for those who struggled on the course, and was often in need of such sympathy myself. Still, I was bemused at the way my fellows blew off steam by targeting the structure of the course itself: whether that day's drills developed the proper cognitive skills, etc. I confess I'm generally an autodidact and might not have been in tune with their psychology of language-learning, perhaps derived from graduate language programs. I don't only mean my roommate at the university hostel, who was miffed at being placed in the intermediate class and complained testily, "I'm just as good at grammar and exercises as the advanced level -- I just can't speak!" (It goes without saying the Turkish watermelon-sellers outside the hostel didn't recognize these distinctions.) I mean rather the constant, shifting search by my classmates for a *better method* to learn verbs or Turkish noun agglutination -- something presumably less "old-fashioned" and grounded in the latest "scientific techniques," which would make the stony path we were all treading a little smoother. I don't know if I should extrapolate from this a broader American quest for elixirs and silver bullets, *the* self-help book that will set me right or *the* management guide that will fix my company... Suffice it to say, the pre-pop psychology achievements of Burton, Schliemann, Iorga or John Stuart Mill should speak for

themselves. And lest they be dismissed as freaks, closer to home the sellers in the Grand Bazaar command a score of languages between them, while even the street-urchin shoe-shine boys curse me freely in five if I tip them poorly.[1]

Bosphorus straits -- Population patterns -- Bazaars -- Traffic

Tony Greenwood at the American Research Institute in Turkey generously invited me to house-sit for a short time in a spot overlooking the Bosphorus. It took about a week of watching to get a feel for the straits, the pace of activity and the volume of shipping. It is a grand show. Half-a-dozen of the tankers I have seen wheeling around the stretch where I sit between Bosphorus and Fatih bridges must have been close to 200,000 tons. They are occasionally guided by tugs or pilotships. I haven't counted, but plenty are flying Russian and Ukrainian colours. There is also a Crimean ship which passes regularly, Kazakhstan II, a passenger liner of some sort, as well as heavily-laden Turkish cargo boats, their decks barely above the waterline. A battleship has gone by, and a naval cruiser; for all I know submarines are slinking along the bottom. All these share the waterlanes with the regular Bosphorus ferries, zippy motorboats, at least one wetcycle, the pleasurecraft moored in the marina of prosperous Bebek, illuminated floating restaurants, and the Bosphorus Swimming Club, who were out one day to test their mettle against the murderous current.

The press is beginning to rumble about a full-blown international dispute, primarily between Turkey and Russia, if Turkey unilaterally revises the Montreux Convention of 1936 which provides for freedom of the straits to all shipping in peacetime. I am in a better position now to appreciate the real danger for collisions and spills in the middle of Istanbul. State Minister for Maritime Affairs Saglar went public this month that he has pleaded for a radar system to be installed but the Treasury has pleaded poor, amazingly: the sum at stake is $2 million. It has been hinted that more radical measures, such as Turkey's taking it into its hands to regulate the flow of ships, may follow. It will be a question to investigate; for the moment, I only allude to it as a problem hitting the horizon.

I have been walking Istanbul with the energy, if not quite the stamina, of a Lyell with his legendary 40-mile-a-day walks in order to observe geological strata. The patterns of *social* strata which I have noticed baffle me. I was expecting, of course, to cross paths with both the very poor and the very rich (I am still taken aback by how modern and very up-market the enormous Akmerkez shopping complex is, though, opened in Etiler at the beginning of the year, and by the swanky people who can afford to shop there at a time when "Çiller's economic crisis" is on everybody's lips). The real surprise is to find rich and poor areas superimposed. Brixton is a long way from Bond Street, and no one really destitute lives within walking distance of the Louvre: but I stumbled on slums ten minutes from the Blue Mosque; spotty patterns of detached houses mixed in with squatters in Üsküdar; and children without shoes not far from the American Consulate and the Anglo-Ottoman splendour of the Pera Palace Hotel. Doubtless I need enlightening about

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[1] I mustn't dilate on this subject, but with the excuse that Romania is within the scope of my fellowship I can't resist reproducing what should be the last word in demystifying language-learning techniques, from Mircea Eliade: "My admirable student J.O. asks me today how he can learn sanscrit *quickly*. I tell him, by sitting down every morning at your desk and studying only sanscrit for twelve to sixteen hours a day. (Long walks for health included, mornings and evenings.) After four-five months you can read other things too, but preferably only works dealing with Indian history or culture. That's what I did my first year in Calcutta, I add [...] 'Yes, but you...' J.O. begins. 'It's nothing to do with me,' I interrupt. 'Lots of people have done it; take for example the Indianist and Italian polymath Angelo de Gubernatis, almost forgotten today. Read his memoirs and you'll see he learnt sanscrit in a summer, shutting himself in a village near Berlin and not coming out except to buy food...'" (Jurnal, 1972 "decembrie.")

Middle Eastern demographics. When foul backstreets are set in a block or two from Taksim's Istiklal street, with its bright lights and fancy shop windows, I am put on my guard that Istanbul's façade is shallow, with a very different Turkey half-hidden behind the scrim.

Bazaars and street-vendors are fascinating: they surely make up the core of Istanbul as a city. How many of them make a living is a mystery; clearly they must be unlicensed and not pay taxes since the police periodically move them on. One wonders what Baron Haussmann as Western rationalist would have made of it all; I imagine him walking at my shoulder itching for bulldozers. What a different world it is here! I know that Western futurologists predict that services -- maybe even cities -- will no longer be geographically concentrated but come to be spread out more evenly. There will be a "smooth dispersion of competences," with specializations scattered widely while individuals become network nodes talking by computer. This scenario seemed rather far away one evening as I browsed a long line of tables of identical hardware sellers grouped near Beyazit. Nearby was the street of tennis shoe and household gadget sellers; bisecting that was the street of pencil-holder men (which arose like a mirage when school started and has since disappeared) and hawkers of underwear for Brunnehilde. Their clustering in itself is not the whole story: from New York to Hong Kong electronics shops in particular seem to have a magnetic propensity to cluster. It's the microgeography of these lively market streets, the noisy interactions between people, which I have come to think of as the common man's retort to my anxious futurologists and to their gloomy vistas of atomized units living in homogeneous gesellschaft -- something like a collective version of Dr Johnson's "I refute it thus!", as when he lustily dismissed Berkeley's elaborate metaphysics by kicking a football...

There is no better way to browse or start chats. On the other hand, it is a time-consuming way to shop. One sacrifices the West's speed and efficiency. I know some people deliberately come to less developed countries in the belief that they will find life conducted more humanely, closer to the pace at which human intercourse has proceeded on average for the last 30,000 years. My frustrations at getting things done have been less romantic. To give only one example: I was stymied when I needed a new adaptor for a particular American bubblejet printer. No shop had one or knew where to go. The single large computer mart Spektrum didn't sell them. Furthermore there has been no new edition of the Istanbul telephone book for about eight years. Without a telephone book, or a reliable telephone information service, it was hard to find the distributor. I baulked at telephoning a representative in America, which meant surrender. What was most maddening was that everyone was sure it could be found in Istanbul, if I kept asking... One day a poster caught my eye at a bus stop, advertising an upcoming computer fair at the Hilton. Only there, a week later, did I discover the distributor I needed -- Becom, it was turned out, although even at the fair I had to go asking from stall to stall. Total search time on and off: four weeks. Clearly, balancing the claims of soulless efficiency and a humane pace of life will be a theme to preoccupy me in Turkey for a while to come, especially outside Istanbul.

"It's a very oral, personalized culture here," said Gün Kut of Bogaziçi University, laughing at my story. "You always have to be asking and talking to people, not relying on directions or written instructions. That's the great secret to driving in Istanbul. The traffic is terrifying until you learn to ignore rules and signs, stop waiting for signals, and look for the other drivers' eyes. What a car is going to do is communicated by personal eye contact from driver to driver. It's the same principle cabbies use in New York -- which is why Turks feel at home driving in New York."

It was my turn to laugh -- at what I imagined he meant as a pleasant conceit. Then once I was riding a city bus on the two-lane road which hugs the Bosphorus' European shore. Sitting at the front, a thirteen-year-old passenger reckoned he was going the wrong way. He began discussing it with the driver who nodded sympathetically. As a bus in the opposite lane was about to pass, our driver caught the eye of the other and, without raising his hands from the wheel, must have communicated the whole story with a glance and a jerk

of the chin because both busses came to a screeching halt parallel on the road. Cars began honking on both sides and someone shouted, but only a few passengers looked up vaguely from their newspapers. The child scampered out, waved, crossed around to the other bus, which opened the door for him, and both busses moved on.

Turkish complexes -- Demirel in Hungary -- Émigrés from Bulgaria

Why have many of the Turks I have met referred to a Turkish "inferiority complex," a national sense of insecurity towards the outside world? I am only scratching the surface on this one. Respected intellectuals from Murat Belge to members of Bogaziçi's Westernized élite have noted the struggle of Turks to prove themselves, especially to the West. I have yet to meet a Turkish "Islamic" intellectual (save Serif Mardin briefly) to hear whether they judge the situation similarly. Once on the lookout for this tendency, I have caught glimpses of it: in one newspaper's finding moral support in quoting a British tabloid's support for Turkey in its fight against separatists; or in another's reporting gratefully that Turkey was a popular spot for American tourists this year, and that they said nice things about it.

Probably this is the sharpest example I have found: Orhan Pamuk's Beyaz Kale ["The White Castle"] is said to be the best-selling Turkish novel of all time. It has run through 12 editions since 1985. Nevertheless, the endorsements chosen for the back cover are exclusively *foreign*. The blurb reads, "The White Castle has met with extraordinary interest and enthusiasm in Europe and America." It goes on to quote positive notices from The New York Times Book Review, The Independent, Frankfurter Allgemeine... It is rather as if Gore Vidal's publishers relied for their accolades on good references in the Turkish literary reviews. I tried to consider what is happening when a country's own critics and commentators are eschewed as too soft, or too parochial, or maybe just lacking in name recognition among their own audiences, and marketing turns instead to the hard currency of foreign fiat. It would be different if this were an economics or science textbook. I am very sorry if Turks feel they must look abroad to have their artistic tastes confirmed, in literature or music or painting. Ex-President Ozal spent most of the 1980's pushing Turkey Westwards, by trying to open it to the mainstream European economy --but surely not so the international marketplace could be an arbiter of the Turkish creative imagination.

There was even supposed to be reflected glory for Mrs Çiller in being seen in company with Henry Kissinger (I would have thought it would be the other way round by now): she hosted a banquet in his honour this month. This was considered front-page material. In one way, however, the evening backfired for her. Her decision to wear red, her daringly bright make-up and expansive good mood were all detailed by the television and newspapers, and not only the tabloids. Unfortunately, it turned out she had the bad luck of partying on a day when the Kurdish separatist PKK killed six state teachers at the opening of school in Tunceli, in Turkey's east. The dailies then turned grim and Mrs Çiller caught it for sporting the glad rags while innocent public servants were dying. A Cumhurriyet columnist juxtaposed the stories for the full effect. He listed the teachers' names, ages and birthplaces, reminding us in the same breath of the banquet and the colour of Mrs Çiller's clothes... By implication the "blond, female prime minister" was being accused not only of political helplessness but of *moral* negligence... I thought this was melodrama worthy of Auden's "Fall of the Roman Empire", where the unconcerned élite in the capital are described socializing gaily while "agents of the fisc pursue Absconding tax-defaulters through The sewers of provincial towns..." But in a more general way the episode tapped into a nagging question that is always lurking under the surface, which seems to be the question for 1994: essentially, *is it all coming together at last or is it all falling apart*? On the one hand, fiscal austerity, upcoming Customs Union with the EU, ties with Central Asia; on the other, urban slums, secularism under the hammer, and the unitary Republic threatened...Here is a question to be looked into while I am here.

It is clear that Turks have another set of complexes, this time with their source not so much inside Turkey as outside it. With the history of Ottoman conquest fresh in the minds of many ex-subject peoples, Turks seem to *expect* their neighbours not to accept them. I got a taste of a how a gesture of reconciliation goes a long way when Turkish President Süleyman Demirel visited Hungary. The television news showed him unveiling a statue of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent erected by the Hungarian government near Szigetvar, where the Ottomans defeated the Hungarians in 1566. I missed the significance, but my friends the Kuts noticed, and my carpet-seller friend on Divanyolu noticed, and even the local kebabçi talked about it: the Hungarians had been able to face up to their history and see Süleyman not still an enemy to be reviled but a part of a shared past. Among Europeans whom the Ottomans conquered, Hungarians were regarded as unique in this, and gained kudos thereby.

I heard more about it at a tea and narghile [water-pipe] garden by the Dolmabahçe Mosque, shaded by plane trees near the water. I had sat down in company with four middle-aged men in jackets, caps and moustaches. They held their pipes limply like jazzmen with clarinets, sucking and blowing through the water and chatting in quiet tones -- they looked like old narghile masters. It happened they were born in Kurdzhali and Pazadzhik, in other words émigré Turks from southeastern Bulgaria. They laughed as they showed me how to chomp down on the mouthpiece and together we enjoyed at least three of the traditional four pleasures of narghile smoking -- "masa, mese, köse, ve Ayse," that is, "tongs, oak, a corner, and Ayse": tongs to manipulate the embers which ignite the tobacco, oak to start a good fire, a corner to enjoy a reclusive, private smoke, and Ayse, a girl's name, her role in making narghile smoking nice, unspecified. As we chatted, they came to a sorrowful consensus that no such national coming to terms with the past, as we had witnessed in Hungary, was possible in Bulgaria. Bulgaria wasn't as advanced, as democratic as Hungary. Certainly they were appreciative and impressed the government in Budapest could get away with erecting such a statue. Turkey, meanwhile, was geographically too close to Bulgaria and memories of Ottoman conquest rankled. I gathered that the Turkish minority (8-10% of 10 million people), as a potential fifth column, was a perpetual irritant to nationalists.

I repeated this conversation about Demirel's trip a few times among Bulgarian Turks living in Istanbul's districts of Küçük Çekmece, Bayrampasa and Avcilar. Most talks happened over endless shots of rose-coloured tea in the tulip-shaped glasses Turkey is famous for. I heard more praise for Hungary's forward-lookingness, more hopelessness that Bulgarian public opinion would have any change of heart soon about Turkey the ex-enemy. A white-collar worker in tie and shirt-sleeves remembered the virulent anti- Turkish campaigns in Bulgaria after 1985 to Slavicize Turkish names. When it should have bonded Turks and average Bulgarians together against a common enemy, the communist regime, it deepened animosities. Why? "Because Bulgarians are all nationalists who supported our persecution." He bit his lip miserably. "I like Bulgaria. I supported Bulgaria until they changed my name," he said. He emigrated with his parents in 1989.

Elsewhere a man my age, trying out his broken English on me, described a simple vignette of prejudice. He was six when his family moved from a village in the Rodopi mountains to Sofia. The children in the neighbourhood asked him who he was. He told them. On learning that he was a Turk, "all ran home to find knives." Why? I exclaimed. He thought for a moment. "To come and cut me, I think..." His friend sitting with us recalled his military service between the ages of 18-20 -- which he was made to endure before being permitted to emigrate, oddly. According to him, since Turkey's 24-hour invasion of Cyprus in 1974, Bulgarian drill-sergeants *had been charged* with warning that Turkey might launch a blitzkrieg invasion against them too at any time. Thus a line connecting Turkish militarism from the fall of Constantinople to the invasion of Cyprus is explicitly drawn, reminding everyone that Turkey is by nature an expansionist, occupying power.

The chain across the Moskva

Since this last claim might be a slander on the Bulgarian military it is time invoke Herodotus again. I intend to clear out of Istanbul soon and look forward to judging matters in Bulgaria and elsewhere with my own eyes. If I could see unmediated some of the actions driving events forward in Turkey, I would be happy indeed: even to excise from my vocabulary the cotton-candy words of the social sciences --"issue," "orientation," "influence," "developments" -- which are at best vague shorthand, and at worst misleading euphemisms, for something else, something existing and happening in the real world.

Once my much-respected medieval Russian history professor took me to lunch to help me sort out some problems I was having conceptualizing the subject. I wanted to write a term paper on the rise of Moscow, but his lecture on the subject had confused me. "For one
thing, Moscow flourished because its situation allowed it to command the confluence of rivers necessary for the Volga trade route," he patiently explained again. "Y-yes," I hesitated, not wanting to antagonize him, but then confessed I didn't understand quite what that *meant*. "Goods were passing Moscow on ships," he said with a frown, "the Muscovites could skim off a tax." Inexperienced in the ways of river traffic, I mustered the courage to ask again, "Please, *how* exactly do you mean?" Well, he said, "if you really want to get down to it, I suppose first the Muscovites would throw a chain across the Moskva river. Then they would pile into rowboats and board the vessel. They'd take out their swords and point them at the captain. If he didn't give them a proportion of the cargo in kind or currency they'd slash his neck right there." If I could describe what's happening to Turkey with such immediacy and vividness, I believe my fellowship would be well served.